

After Cosby / after the L.A. Rebellion: the politics of transnational culture in the post Cold War era

by the Editors

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THE SOCIETY FOR CINEMA STUDIES RESOLUTION

1. The verdict to acquit four white Los Angeles Police Department officers contradicts powerful visual evidence — video evidence of excessive police brutality seen globally.
 2. The reaction in the streets of Los Angeles and other cities is fueled by the jury's deliberate refusal to "see" this visual evidence the way that most of us — regardless of color — saw these images.
 3. But how did they "see" this video? They saw it repeatedly, repeatedly — desensitized to its power and effect. They saw it in slow motion, analytically — as the defense supplied a "reading" of the appropriateness of each officer's reaction. This demonstrates how close readings can incur misreading. Our outrage is that, even with visual evidence, Blacks' experience of police brutality does not count.
 4. As media educators, we must voice our outrage at this verdict and endorse all efforts to indict the LAPD officers for civil rights violations.
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The last week of April, 1992, provided one of those historical divides that easily marks cultural patterns. *The Cosby Show* ended its successful run on television and, following the acquittal of four of the police officers who beat Rodney King, the rebellion in Los Angeles began. As media events the two moments marked a massive contradiction in U.S. life in the 1990s. As Black sidekick on a popular TV spy show in the past, as family- and kids-oriented standup comedian, as pitch man for Jell-O, and as sitcom dad, Bill Cosby represented the kind of African American male that white America could accept into their homes. And, as Michael Budd and Clay Steinman argue in their analysis of *The Cosby Show* in this issue, Cosby

served unwittingly to promote some key myths of the Reagan-Bush era. According to this "new racism," race wasn't a problem anymore. Most Blacks were now middle class (or on their way), and affirmative action, entitlements, and other social welfare programs for minorities were no longer needed. Taxes could be cut to enhance personal consumption. We would have more police and prisons to deal with those few inner city dwellers who somehow refused to go along. So went the myth, anyway.

The verdict in the LA policemen's trial and its immediate aftermath came at the same time as the Society for Cinema Studies meeting this year, which gave the several hundred media academics many chances to compare notes on and impressions of the breaking news event as well as to discuss the famous videotape footage of Rodney King being beaten by the cops. After a while a petition circulated endorsing an official resolution.

The sense of the resolution was clear, and it quickly collected signatures. The general leftward tilt of film/TV/video teachers as a group is clearly indicated by the general themes of this and the two previous SCS meetings. Topics on multiculturalism marked the convention program, plenary sessions, and many of the individual panels. [We discussed some reasons for the relatively progressive situation of many media educators in two previous JUMP CUT editorials: "Disharmonic Convergence" (no 34, 1989) and "'P.C.' Hysteria" (no. 36, 1991) — each available for \$4.00.] On closer inspection of the SCS resolution, though, there's a certain irony in having academics who have pioneered close visual analysis of texts claiming that when the defense lawyers did it, something went wrong. Of course, the main point was that the defense isolated specific blows to King to justify each one, and thus the defense subverted the meaning of the rapid flow to provide the jury with an excuse for forgetting the "excessive force" reading that comes from seeing the rapid series of blows. But one wonders if the same argument couldn't be used to question some of the excessively refined readings of films and tapes offered by SCS members themselves, especially those which purport to reveal ironies and subtleties which turn works that initially seem to function in one way into their opposite.

In the context of these events and others, such as the dissolution of Eastern Bloc communism, we thought it useful to provide a few introductory remarks to this issue which we see as continuing and extending some of our previous work, but which we also see as usefully marking some of the present ferment in radical cultural analysis. As editors we see connections and themes developing here which reflect a more general set of changes in our own field of concern.

Increasingly issues of the complexity and multiplicity of identities are coming forward in the study of media. The earlier vision of a pure high culture radical form, following the general lines of Adorno's aesthetics, as embodied in the work of the sophisticated European art films of figures such as Straub and Huillet or Duras, now seems like the last gasp of Eurocentric elitism to many. The call for a radical political content in a radical avant-garde form that inspired much of a push for a "counter-cinema" in the 1970s seldom appears in today's writing on media issues.

Work on popular media forms and finding subversion in Pee Wee Herman or David Lynch seem the current direction for many. Part of this follows trends in analysis which have moved to considering how different audiences make or re-make meaning from what's provided by different texts.

But part of it is also a changed sense of political reality. Gone are the days, hopefully, when Barbara Kopple's film on Kentucky coal miners, *HARLAN COUNTY, U.S.A.* [reviews in JC, no. 14 and 15, March and July, 1977; interview in JC, no. 14 — both issues available, @\$2.00] could be dismissed as reactionary because it used a realist form, as was once done by one form-crazed zealot in a presumably radical media publication. But gone too are the days when U.S. workers could be portrayed as simply heroic in their struggles or embodiments of populist virtue. Kopple's most recent film, *AMERICAN DREAM*, carefully reflects on the complexities of the Hormel packing strike in Minnesota and the sadly disorganized state of "organized" labor in the U.S. today.

This new political reality has also changed how we think and talk about the third world and racial issues. The time when much of the U.S. left supported any third world leader who opposed the United States, no matter how brutal and corrupt that leader was in the context of his own country, has passed. Under the pressure of world events and especially the decline of revolutionary movements in the third world and the Black liberation movement at home, we have been forced to rethink our responses. The very fluid term "multicultural" has tended to replace the more dogmatic term "third world."

Refining multiculturalism

Unfortunately, so much has been put under the banner of multiculturalism that the term has become almost useless in an analytic sense, though it is obviously useful for rallying diverse people with somewhat different agendas against rightwing attacks, and polemically helpful in exposing the elitist agenda of the right. We find it worthwhile to distinguish at least two uses of the concept of multiculturalism. Intellectuals and activists frequently invoke the term to signal a call for diversity. It has a positive function in calling for an expansion of the canon of works considered in cultural production, for pushing the boundaries outward to encompass what has remained marginal. And yet the weakness of this simple affirmation of diversity becomes obvious when it is not joined with an active critique of Eurocentricism, patriarchal domination, and capitalist economics and social domination. When multiculturalism itself cannot account for the presence of multiple factors in cultural production and consumption, too often it falls into a strict identity politics, which offer a narrow agenda for action and a homogenized nationalism (be that of the post colonial nation or the queer nation) or self-referential separatism.

But in general in the present flux of radical cultural studies, it's possible to see an essentially (if we can fall into a teeny bit of essentialism) productive ferment. That there is no dominant theory, no leading figure, nor clear-cut direction should not detract from seeing a productive contention in progress. Even in the search for appropriate terms this activity has produced an abundance of suggestive ideas. Multiculturalism, cross-culturalism, comparative culturalism, transnationalism,

postcolonialism, syncretism, and so forth have all come forward, as have a string of other terms: dialogism, polyvocal, polyglot, creole, diaspora, subaltern, marginal, peripheral, border culture, migration, nomads, assimilation/ dissimulation. These terms and others reflect a new awareness of the need to advance discussion with a fine-tuned attention to differences and the complexity of identity. At times it seems that successfully negotiating culture in the mainstream means not simply becoming a celebrity, as Warhol recognized, but constantly reinventing fresh new versions of celebrity pitched at an all-consuming media, as Madonna has accomplished.

New theories

Against the traditional leftist concern with organizing direct political opposition to the state and concentrating on the mobilization of the industrial proletariat into trade unions and worker's parties, it is much more broadly accepted now that culture, especially as embodied in the media, and everyday life are crucial areas for political analysis and action. Furthermore, much of the radical theoretical analysis of culture that has developed in the past twenty-five years or so has broken with dogmatism and rigid pattern thinking in some very healthy and constructive ways. Jacques Derrida's Big Idea, that analysis must consist of endless deconstruction so as not to fall into rigidity is doubtless correct, although many who find this a profound insight seem to be ignorant that Lenin said the same thing in his writings on dialectics. Also, Michel Foucault's argument that power is not simply concentrated in formal political institutions, but is vastly diffused throughout the organization of society, particularly by means of culture, has been a powerful tool for leftists and feminists to investigate the operation of ideology and power in the microlevels of society including the formations of sexuality and gender. (And is doubtless a great revelation to people who never studied social history, anthropology, or sociology.)

However, complex cultural analysis from a radical perspective drawn from Foucault and Derrida has also proven to have its pitfalls. If power is increasingly dispersed in society and simulated in a variety of forms and micro-institutions, it is difficult to recognize. If it proliferates through multiplication, seeking continuous decentering, dispersal and a kind of infinite regression, this turns out to be the perfect justification for the existence of intellectuals. Only they can really "find" this dispersed power, and "recognize" its diffuse structure. One might think then that society doesn't really have anyone who is powerful and that those in positions of authority are prisoners of their position. Organizing for any specific political goal becomes a delusion or an unwitting reproduction of the same old power structures. Indeed, Foucault himself advised against organizing a gay liberation movement for these reasons until late in his life when he conceded that the organizing had been effective.

Others following Foucault's reasoning into the postmodern scene claim that there are no more meta-narratives or grand schemes that explain things. To the extent that this dismisses a kind of Marxism that was rigid and inflexible, open to learning nothing new from experience or other perspectives, we can agree. Any system of

thought that turns into a set of formulae is already dead. But this can also lead to another happy delusion — that attempting to reason about the nature of power and to challenge it is impossible. Of course this intellectual delusion itself is a "meta-narrative," one especially comforting to those who don't want to get involved in the messy business of activism.

A strategy for left cultural analysis

Given what has happened globally, and given what we've learned locally in working on JUMP CUT, we can affirm some strategic perspectives for the present and near future in terms of our own project. We hold these not as tenets of a rigid dogma against which to judge everything we come into contact with, but as some guiding ideas gained from experience and thoughtful reflection. Any working out of these principles must be contingent, provisional, and open to revision. [We would also like to refer our readers to the editorial writings in the first thirteen issues of JUMP CUT (1974-75) in which we developed much of our own thinking about cultural analysis.]

First of all, we think it is important to maintain an anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist analysis. The collapse of communist parties shows in full, final form the problems with those parties' theory and practice, but it hardly eliminates class exploitation at home and abroad. In its transnational phase capitalism takes different forms but the issues of exploitation and repression do not magically go away, though they certainly end up transformed.

The comparison between the success of Cosby and the brutal beating of Rodney King show the transformation clearly. Official violence against African Americans goes back to the very birth of our nation as does their rebellion against it. But now African American individuals also participate in the highest reaches of the our society's mainstream.

Second, we must constantly make the relation of class, gender, and race a priority in both analysis and cultural production. By saying this we do not wish to invoke an all-purpose mantra but to affirm these as absolutely central categories for cultural analysis and practice. Other factors may be present or important, for example, age and generation or region and locality. However, to proceed with an analysis based on only one or two of these three main terms can only get so far. Now, our energy must be applied to a more thorough consideration of the interrelation of these factors and a significant number of the articles in this issue of JUMP CUT do just that.

Third, we need to develop institutional analysis along with textual analysis. For too long the study of media and political cultural activism has proceeded with a separation between aesthetic analysis and sociological analysis. Concern for form and style have been divorced from institutional and economic study. There's a rigid policing of disciplinary boundaries in U.S. higher education to ensure that those who haven't accepted the dominant orthodoxies of methodology, protocol, and pertinence as part of their training will do so in order to get financial and prestige rewards from the system. In a curious admission of this concern, several SCS

leaders at the meeting mentioned above expressed the fear that printing reports from the various minority caucuses (e.g., people of color, gays and lesbians) in the society's journal might "piss people off."

Fourth, we need to keep track of rapidly accelerating global changes in order to keep our analysis close to that changing world. This changing world challenges us to develop an analysis which is flexible and itself open to change, an analysis which can account for change without dissolving into a belief in fluidity which has absolutely no reference points, no goals, and no ability to strategize opposition to injustice and inhumanity. Such a way of proceeding calls for understanding the varied intersections of different issues and the complexity of specific cases without giving up the clarity achieved by thinking globally, daring to use the tools of reason, and making priorities.

One scene for meeting such challenges is in the creation of alternative cultural practices. To say this does not forfeit forever the possibility of changing the dominant institutions or the importance of operating within them, as we usually must, in such a way as to challenge them. Such activities are not negligible and at certain moments can coalesce into a distinct movement for structural change. Thus, understanding dominant media practices and institutions must remain an ongoing area for concern.

But to be realistic, we have a far greater ability to develop alternative cultural and political institutions in which we can develop ideas and practices which may now be seen as utopian, but which can help create the basis for and point the way to significant change. The post WWII Civil Rights Movement as well as the more recent feminist and gay and lesbians movements have all significantly changed the world in which we live and a vibrant alternative culture has always been an important part of such movements. In Moscow, East Berlin, and Tienanmen Square people sang "We Shall Overcome."

We have loosely grouped the articles in this issue together by theme: international issues, gay and lesbian media, and mainstream genres and forms. Yet there are many theoretical and social crosscurrents tying them together which illustrate our authors' adeptness at the kind of cultural analysis which we proposed above. We would like to point out some of these interconnections for your consideration and to enhance your reading of each piece.

Clay Steinman and Mike Budd offer an analysis of *THE COSBY SHOW* in terms of ambiguities and complexities of audience response and the type of narrative which can achieve mainstream commercial success, one which embodies the media's racism and class bias. Jyotika Viridi makes a very similar argument about the commercial success of the independent feature film about India's street children, *SALAAM BOMBAY!* as does Ron Gregg about PBS' first treatment of AIDS in the first installment of *The AIDS Quarterly* series, *AIDS: CHAPTER ONE*. All of these authors respect viewers' desires to see certain issues treated and certain subcultures represented, but offer an analysis of the mechanisms and processes of narrative homogenization imposed by mainstream media distribution venues in the United States. They discuss network pressures but also the process of self-

censorship and self-restriction enacted by the producers and directors of each work.

John Caldwell analyzes how Hollywood movies are shown on television. The networks directly manipulate these movies' subject matter and formal construction so as to fit them into its "flow." They do this through editing, the juxtaposition of movie and news images, and using new visual TV-techniques to frame the dominant ideology. In this instance, when a Los Angeles TV station showed the film SALVADOR the week Noriega came to trial in the United States, all images from Latin America, including that of Daniel Ortega, flowed together in such a way as to nullify the most obvious particular meanings of SALVADOR and Noriega's capture and trial.

In contrast, Tony Williams provides a resource guide to video sales and rentals that indicates how large a selection of media from around the world, both mainstream and independently produced, is available in the United States. For teachers, both Caldwell and Williams provide key insights on the institutional mechanisms whereby video "movies" are brought to us and our students, and the forms by which we obtain and see them, all of which shape in fact what "the movie" means. In addition Blanche Chang reviews Claus Mueller's book on the increasing appearance of third world TV programming in the North (so far in Europe more than in the United States). Nonetheless, here is another source of televisual material both for analysis and for reuse.

In a complementary way to Caldwell, Scott Nygren analyzes the complexity of the west's representations of China's "democracy" as well as two contemporary Chinese fictional films that indicate how some of these complexities are being worked out by Chinese media makers. In a more personal vein, Peter Scheckner, who was teaching in China during the repression of the students in Tienanmen Square, had brought a number of Hollywood films on videotape with him and discusses his students' reactions, often unexpected, to U. S. cinema and their presuppositions about U.S. life.

In contrast to the kind of misrepresentation of child labor in India which Jyotika Virda found in SALAAM BOMBAY! this misrepresentation is enhanced by the film's reliance on realism and pathos as substitutes for class and colonial analysis, Robert Payne discusses the outright lie in the Hollywood's COME SEE THE PARADISE, a feature fiction film about the WW2 Japanese American internment. In a key scene in the film, Alan Parker has his imprisoned family announce in the internment camp dining hall that the Supreme Court declared the camps unconstitutional; this then in the film is the reason the family is let free. In historical fact, the Supreme Court decided precisely the opposite in 1944, and thereby provided one of the main arguments used by the German defense attorneys at the Nuremberg trials: the German concentration camps had precedent under U.S. law.

Dealing with the same subject matter, director Lise Yasui used a different form, the personal documentary, and a different focus, a grandfather who never recovered from the effects of his internment. Cassandra Van Buren analyzes Yasui and Ann

Tegnell's FAMILY GATHERING to locate it within the tradition of the feminist documentary, which analyzes both the construction of the woman's subjectivity as well as her history and social situation.

With different subject matter, but also tackling some of the issues of "locatedness," John Goss' documentary WILD LIFE shows two gay Latino adolescents as they wish to present themselves to the filmmaker. Gabriel Gomez analyzes the ways in which this is a "responsible" documentary style, and also the difficulties of making media documenting underage gay youth. In a sense, WILD LIFE is also an antidote to the kind of representation of street youth that Viridi criticized in SALAAM BOMBAY! That is, like FAMILY GATHERING, WILD LIFE still uses a somewhat realist style but struggles to find ways to incorporate self-representation of its participants and the location of its maker as well. In a similar vein, Sara Halprin writes about the origins of a documentary about opera chorus singers in some 8mm film footage shot by co-director Allie Light's first husband secretly onstage in 1958 while he was a chorister himself. Halprin locates herself as a critic as someone who was involved with the directors during the making of the film, and her essay incorporates notes from the directors' film journals.

In a more critical vein, independent filmmaker and writer, Jack Waters analyzes the intersection of gay and race issues in the documentaries, PARIS IS BURNING and TRUTH OR DARE. Here, he faults these works for lacking that which FAMILY GATHERING exhibited, a located, responsible positioning of the filmmaker for her own subjective involvement. He also continues the kind of critique offered elsewhere about works using realism and pathos as a substitute for analyzing the complexities of race, gender, and class positions — both that of the films' subjects and that of the makers. Ron Gregg also takes up the issue of documentary style in his observations about PBS' showing the realist documentary, ABSOLUTELY POSITIVE, but refusing to show the more racially controversial and more formally experimental, TONGUES UNTIED.

Edith Becker, Jennifer Montgomery and Daryl Chin assess the importance of gay and lesbian festivals, especially in highlighting experimental work. Chin also indicates the importance of low-budget formats for counter-cultural media work. In that vein, there is a tie between the discussion of these works, the documentaries discussed above, and all the works available on video discussed by Tony Williams. Due to video rental and sales we have a vastly different situation now in terms of access to independently produced media. This produces a kind of access unparalleled in the past and an ability to do a close analysis previously restricted to a few.

Brad Chisholm gives a view of how radical distribution was achieved in the past. His article on Film and Photo league exhibition strategies can be compared with the exhibition strategies of having women's, Black, Latino, Asian, and gay and lesbian film and video festivals, and how these festivals themselves have become yearly events in some areas and have become more focused and more specialized, as in the case of the New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival. In the original women's film festivals in the 70s and even in the 80s, many works were

shown that just disappeared in the makers' closets after that. Now, more and more works remain in distribution through video, and the crucial work of progressive video distributors advances the kind of radical critical and cultural agenda that we described above. It is essential that progressive media people expand their repertoire and use the resources outlined by Williams to write about, teach, rent, and program the many artistic works that in fact have already explored new ways to deal with the cultural complexities we outlined at the beginning of this discussion.

Approaching mainstream film and television, Jane Gaines reassesses Dorothy Arzner's importance for feminist criticism, draws on a hypothetical postulate about Arzner and Joan Crawford, and begins a long-needed critical analysis of the role of the gay costumer in Hollywood:

"Whenever they could, they worked in a vein that thwarted the tendency of costume to become naturalized as clothes and the tendency of gender to become naturalized as a sexualized body."

Gretchen Bisplinghoff examines the Hollywood melodrama in terms of how it deals with mental illness in women characters. She finds that Freud's notions of the proper male and female roles play an important part here. Women must "accept their proper position in life as determined by their sexual identity." Their failure or refusal to do so quickly brings a "diagnosis of abnormality."

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